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Holding the mirror to the news media

In the last few years the press has spent more time looking in the mirror than Snow White's stepmother. A wave of studies and polls, sponsored by newspapers, television networks and groups such as the American Society of Newspaper Editors, have examined the way the public feels about news coverage, about issues such as bias, impartiality and fairness.

The results of many of these studies manage to wind up concluding that the press isn't doing all that bad a job, but this has become an increasingly cautious age for journalism.

The chilling effect of libel is part of the dilemma. And in Ronald Reagan's America we hear more about people wanting "good news," about a society that believes the press is too powerful, that wants to see its media playing on the home team.

Northern California is hardly the wilderness, but a college professor out there named Carl Jensen has been crying for nine years. And his cry is not the most fashionable one in journalism.

Jensen, professor of communications at Sonoma State University, runs a media research program known as Project Censored. The operation is run under Jensen's own steam, as well as his own funding, and goes about the business of identifying stories that were slighted in the media.

Every year, using a panel of judges with backgrounds in journalism, Project Censored publishes a Top 10—stories that should have been told adequately and weren't, at least in the opinion of the project's lights.

"The press ought to be in the business of telling people what they need to know, not what they want to hear," Jensen said in a telephone interview Thursday.

"I'm concerned they aren't doing that. A couple of years ago the American Society of Newspaper Editors was talking about 'a marketing approach to journalism.' That just won't do. The media have to take on the hard issues and cover the important stories, or people's faith in what they read in newspapers will continue to erode."

Project Censored accepts story nominations from across the country, national and international stories from various sources that are sent in by readers and watchers, as well as reporters, editors, TV producers and, according to Jensen, his best source, librarians.

The list is whittled down from 250 to 25 before the judges pick their Top 10. For 1984 the project's 12-member panel included Ben Bag-

dikian, head of the graduate program in journalism at the University of California at Berkeley, and Nicholas Johnson, a former head of the Federal Communications Commission.

Syndicated columnist Mary McGrory was a judge, along with Curtis MacDougall, professor emeritus of journalism at Northwestern University, and Jessica Mitford, whom Time magazine called the "queen of the muckrakers."

According to Project Censored, the most widely ignored story of last year had to do with the public perception of the Soviet military build-up. There were reliable reports that the Soviets had slowed the process of military expansion in recent years, while United States government reports presented inaccurate, inflated estimates of Soviet military spending.

Other stories cited by Project Censored involved press coverage of the elections in Nicaragua, the CIA involvement with "death squads" in El Salvador and a trio of stories about the behind-the-scenes activities of Reagan stalwarts [Nevada Sen. Paul Laxalt, Atty. Gen. Edwin Meese and USIA director Charles Wick] that Project judges called "potentially explosive" in terms of the 1984 presidential election.

Jensen insists that his project carries no particular political slant, despite the narrow ideological range of the aforementioned stories.

"Over the years," he said, "we've pointed out stories like the Trilateral Commission, which was a target of the John Birch Society and which we felt was inadequately covered. The massacre by the Communists in Cambodia was on our list a few years ago. That story wasn't told as it should have been."

"Unfortunately, what we do is often interpreted as having a left-wing bias. We don't think these stories are necessarily liberal or conservative. We think they're human stories, important stories, that aren't being reported."

At a time when the press is perceived as backing off volatile issues, Jensen would like to see a more aggressive posture.

"There's too much junk-food news," he said, "too much attention paid to stories like John DeLorean or the Claus von Bulow trial. And there are too many issues that aren't being addressed, for whatever reason."

So Carl Jensen, with his clippings and his mailings, stays on his unfashionable case, wondering who will listen when the charged atmosphere in the media is summed up by a headline in the Los Angeles Times: "POLL: Readers Convinced Paper They Read Most Is Not Biased."

Now there's the voice of a trade brimming with self-confidence.